

“CAN’T YOU SEE” (THE MARSHALL TUCKER BAND)

I was four-years-old. A petite store-bought cake sat on the kitchen table. Its plastic dome bore an orange “Budget Buy!” sticker from the Jewel-Osco bakery. Next to the cake, Mom placed her birthday gift to Dad; something called “a record player.” Apparently, Dad had a sizable collection of these things called “records.” But he hadn’t been able to “spin” them in years. Record players weren’t cheap. Thinking back on it now, we were so broke that Mom probably scrimped nickels, dimes, and sofa change for well over a year to make this purchase.

Dad tore open the box and placed the device on our kitchen counter. Through her patented toothy grin, Mom insisted, “Set it up in the living room!” But Dad wouldn’t listen. For the record (pun intended), that player remained on the counter—and would be played every day—for almost a year. Mom eventually moved it herself.

Dad was like a giddy teenager being handed keys to the family roadster at a 16th birthday party. He darted out of the room and returned just as quickly carrying a milk crate of records from our crawl space. (The only time I ever saw him run faster was years later, when our car was broken into at three in the morning. Dad ran outside in his whitey-tighties and chased the burglar with a baseball bat... But that’s a whole other story.)

Dad pulled out an album. Its cover was brown and emblazoned with the words “MARSHALL TUCKER.” Near the upper-right corner, in faded marker, someone handwrote “QUICK.” This, I learned was Dad’s college nickname. (Sitting at his fraternity’s dinner table, someone shouted, “Quick! Pass the salt!” Dad was the first to respond. The name stuck.) At parties in the 1970s, it was customary to bring your records. To prevent mix-ups, you wrote your name on them. (If only those tweens, teens, and twenty-somethings knew how collectable records would become—and how writing your name on them dramatically lowered their value.)

We watched in anticipation as a primitive hydraulic arm raised the needle from its cradle, moved it several inches inward, and dropped it onto the spinning record’s edge. A soft, distinct crackling sound—born of microscopic dust particles and incidental scratches rapidly hitting the needle—emanated from a small speaker built into this magical machine. When I heard those first chords strummed on an acoustic guitar by The Marshall Tucker Band’s chief songwriter Toy Caldwell, I was hooked.

Dad picked me up in his arms and swung me around the room. This was an exaggerated version of something adults called “dancing.” Only now do I realize the significance of that moment. It’s the first time I can remember hearing recorded music. And I knew immediately that I wanted my own collection of these things that Dad called “records.”

“ERUPTION/YOU REALLY GOT ME” (VAN HALEN)

Flash-forward: One year later. Grandma bought me a Fisher-Price Phonograph, my first record player. It was a pricey purchase. Grandma had to put in overtime at a now-defunct Jovan cosmetics factory. (I can still smell the lavender perfume that permanently permeated her skin, even decades after she retired from the plant.) My record collection was limited to Sesame Street (“The Best of Bert and Ernie”), and a series of children’s audiobooks based on a cartoon called “He-Man.”

Around this time, Dad decided to start his own business. He bought a beat-up pickup that perpetually stalled and stockpiled secondhand tools. His “work van” was as rusty as my hair and more holey than Swiss cheese. During the summer, Grandma could not watch me every single day, so Dad often took me to work. He’d bring old desk calendars—those ones that are two or three feet wide and flip each month on its blank backside. I now had a canvas for my Rose Art crayons. (We weren’t in good enough financial shape to buy Crayolas.) I would lay on my stomach and draw while Dad busting his knuckles on broken heaters and air conditioners. Dad only took one break during his eight-hour work days. At noon, he’d stop, sit, eat a liverwurst sandwich, and drink from whatever two-liter bottle of (flat) soda that our family had opened and half-drunk the night before.

In the cab of his truck, Dad had a radio (its antenna was once a coat hanger) with a tape deck. Unlike my “grand discovery” of vinyl, I knew what tapes were. You could record sound on them. I frequently used my Fischer-Price tape deck (another Grandma present), shoving the microphone in people’s faces for impromptu interviews. But it never dawned on me that someone might use a cassette tape to record music.

On our drive home from one particularly rough afternoon (the sun had turned his farmer’s tan into a burn, and the air was so thick that every step made you feel like a knife’s edge cutting the humidity), Dad put a tape in the deck, hit play, cracked open a paper-bagged can of beer, sipped, tucked it away in a cup holder hidden off to the side of his captain’s chair, put the car in reverse, and pulled out.

After several seconds of limited silence (you couldn’t completely shutout the rattle of an engine in need of a new fan belt), the lead guitar of Eddie Van Halen erupted from the speakers—a volcano of sound, spewing wall-to-wall rock (and roll) lava. I’d never heard anything like it. The whole truck reverberated from what amounted to bombs being dropped on our ears. It was the moment when I knew a musical instrument could assault on my senses.

Van Halen became “my band.”

“BAM!” (THE JERKY BOYS)

My sense of humor evolved between the ages of eight and 15. My jokes tend to be dry and irreverent; “borderline” inappropriate, but sharp enough to be clever. I tend to tiptoe toward the line without really crossing it.

It started with my Dad and his three brothers would sit and spin off-the-wall stories about their youth. When it came to crafting these stories, Uncle Dan was the master. He had a unique talent for making his youth feel like my own. Uncle Dan taught me how to tell a sentimental story about events that aren’t supposed to be sentimental—the ones that, often painfully, force us to mature. Uncle Dan found humor in that which inevitably hurts us the most.

Dad and his brothers also enjoyed making prank phone calls. It’s a lost art. Before cell phones and caller identification, you could grab a phone book, dial a number at random, and set up some unsuspecting sap on the other end of the line. Here are two staples, usually executed at middle school sleepover parties.

“Hello? Is your refrigerator running? You better go and catch it!”

“Is this the bowling alley? Do you have 10-pound balls?”

In addition to collecting music on vinyl, I often raided the record store’s “Comedy” section. The more inappropriate, the more I wanted that comedian’s record. George Carlin. Sam Kinison. Andrew Dice Clay. Their albums were forbidden fruit. But I was determined to take a bite. Sometimes I settled on bootleg tapes (which were usually copies of copies). I still feel a bit guilty for stealing Clay’s most controversial album from the car of my dad’s assistant, Packy—especially since, in retrospect, I should NOT have been listing to it at that age.

Then along came The Jerky Boys. And comedy changed—forever.

Two childhood friends, Brennan and Kamal, would make bizarre, dramatic prank calls using over-the-top character voices. You could argue that each call actually told a story. They recorded these calls, put them out on records, and became a cultural phenomenon. Each album topped the charts, selling millions of copies. (You’ve heard Brennan before. He’s a voice actor on *Family Guy*. The character Mort, the pharmacist, started out as character Brennan used for prank calls.) At one point, there was even *Jerky Boys: The Movie*.

Their calls were surreal, absurd, creative, and ceaselessly quotable. The Jerky Boys helped shaped my comedic sensibilities.

"YOUR NAME" (WILLIE NELSON)

The summer of 2005, the Chicago White Sox had the best record in baseball and I was on a semester-long sabbatical from college. I had student-teaching lined up for that fall. I shouldn't have had a care in the world... at least in theory.

I couldn't shake the weight of a recent, devastating breakup. And my best friends—a married couple who taught classes at a Chicago-suburban college—had taken summer jobs in Colorado.

I was born in Colorado. I'm not a religious person, but staring at the jagged splendor of the Rockies spurs the realization that something out there—not just the mountains, but life itself—is bigger than you. Mentally

and spiritually, I am at peace whenever I return to my birth state.

My friends were college instructors. With summers off, they supplemented their income by working for a large outdoor music festival, setting up stages and running the mixing board for 60-some chart-topping musicians. They worked short hours and were provided lodging and food by the concert promoters at no charge. So when they said, "Come on out here! Clear your head!" I said yes without hesitation.

One afternoon, my friends invited a student of theirs to join us for lunch. Her name was Jessica. She, too, had taken a summer job in Colorado. Everyone kept calling her "Jessie." In fact, when I was told that "Jessie" would be eating with us, I envisioned our guest would

be a dude. So when Jessie(cah) entered the restaurant at the famous Stanley Hotel in Estes Park, Colorado, I thought she was just some random hot chick casually dining on her own. I couldn't turn away. (Jess later revealed, "You looked like a creeper.") When she sat down and said, "Hi, I'm Jessie," it finally clicked.

For me, it was love at first sight. (For her, it took a few more sights.) But I knew, then and there, that our kindred spirits would stir the stars. When I came home, I must have listened to the song "Your Name" a billion times, each time with dreamier eyes and ceaseless sighs.

Six years to the day we met, Jess and I were married at the Stanley Hotel. We played "Your Name" for our First Dance as husband and wife.

I WON'T BACK DOWN (TOM PETTY)

In high school, I was the editor-in-chief of our campus newspaper. (Yes, once upon a time, high schools published print newspapers with articles written by students.) I was also the film critic. I reviewed movies that were popular with teens in the 1990s. Most were R-Rated.

During my senior year, a parent raised concerns about my favorite English teacher (who was also my speech coach). He screened the R-Rated film adaptation of a book we read in class. The movie contained a "suggestive" scene that we had already encountered in the the novel. The parent didn't have a problem with us reading that part; seeing it was a different story. The school board decided to ban the use of R-Rated movies in the classroom. I was told that I could no longer write about R-Rated movies in the paper. I responded by writing opinion-editorial after opinion-editorial lambasting the school board for censoring teachers and students. I turned these editorials into a speech and qualified by the IHSA State tournament. Then one Monday morning, a Dean's Assistant pulled me from my 1st Period class.

I was being suspended. A Chicago newspaper caught wind of my "mission." I was the day's front page story: "Fenton senior strikes blow for free speech." I was now in trouble for "insubordination and defiance."

But I stood my ground, inviting the principal, superintendent, and their wives to an R-Rated movie. I paid for tickets; they bought for popcorn. And after the movie (which I picked), we would have a discussion about what I believed made that particular film appropriate for students, despite its restricted rating.

I won the argument.

I could write about R-Rated movies in the paper. Teachers could use R-Rated movies (with caution) as classroom media. Twenty years later, that verdict still stands.

This moment taught me the power of language, and how to articulate an argument steadily and vehemently, but also with class.

Be angry. But also be respectful.

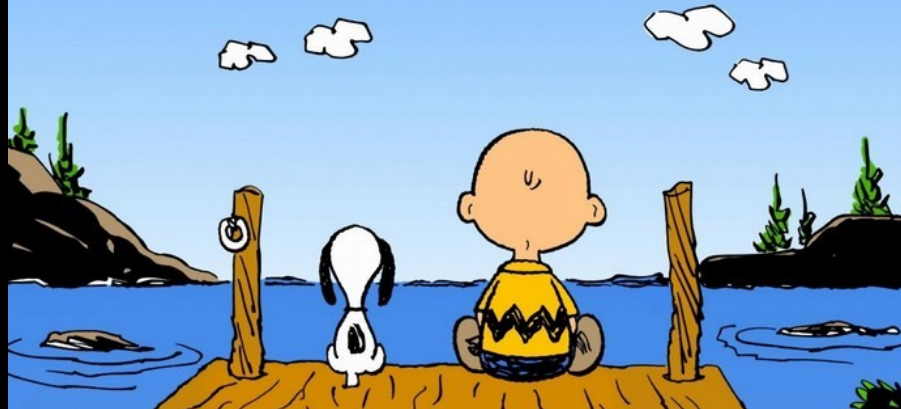
Can't You See (The Marshall Tucker Band)

Eruption/You Really Got Me (Van Halen)

Bam! (The Jerky Boys)

Your Name (Willie Nelson)

**I Won't Back Down
(Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers)**



HAPPINESS IS A SAD SONG

~Meditating On Moments That Made Me Say "Good Grief!"~



by **ANTHONY ZOUBEK** for **SENIOR ENGLISH**